

How the Western Allies Shipped Victims to Stalin

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Wall Street Journal (1923 - Current file); Sep 6, 1983;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Wall Street Journal (1889 - 1993)

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LONDON—On Jan. 19, 1946, a contingent of American military police surrounded a prison camp near Munich with orders to arrest 135 Russians and deliver them to the Soviet authorities. The Russians did not want to be handed over to Stalin. They had every reason to believe they would be shot as soon as they returned. However, the U.S. and Britain had agreed at Yalta a year earlier to repatriate all Soviet citizens after the war, irrespective of their individual wishes and by force if necessary.

The Russians had barricaded themselves inside their huts and stripped to their underwear. When they refused to move, the MPs broke into the huts and dragged them out one by one. One hut was especially well defended. The Americans fired tear gas through the windows. Then, as soon as they broke down the door and entered the hut, the Russians embarked on an orgy of mass suicide. Two men tried to disembowel themselves with broken glass and others stood side by side slashing at each other's throats. One man stuck his head through a window and shook it from side to side, pressing his neck down against the jagged edges.

Haven for Murderers

The MPs beat the men into insensibility and carried them to the waiting trucks on stretchers. Ten men were dead, a few others were taken to the hospital. The rest, some of them seriously injured, were handed over to the Red Army. A month later an additional 1,590 Russians were delivered from the American zone and the number of suicides was five. None of those handed over were ever heard of again, and we must assume that they were all executed.

These episodes were typical of the brutal atmosphere of postwar Europe, where Nazi tyranny had been replaced by chaos, with the result that life was cheap and tens of thousands starved. The principles of justice and democracy for which the U.S. and Britain had supposedly fought the war had been knocked out of shape by Hitler and Stalin. The Western Allies had to protect their interests against the two powerful evil forces. Sometimes, as with the decision to use and protect bestial characters like Klaus Barbie, they compromised the purity of their anti-Nazi struggle. The U.S. still provides a haven for Nazi mass murderers, especially Ukrainians who took part in pogroms and Croatians who were members of the devilish "Stashi" government that terrorized wartime Yugoslavia.

America has apologized to France for the Barbie incident. Deep regret is today felt and expressed by many Americans for

the bombing of Hiroshima, by Britons for the bombing of Dresden. We are not perfect, we too commit crimes, but at least we are ready to recognize them and learn from them. Or so we like to believe. In 1975 Alexander Solzhenitsyn accused the British nation of a collective "sin" for sending innocent Russians back to Stalin's tender mercies in the 1944-47 period. Few Americans even know about this episode, or that they too played a part in it. The Barbie incident reminds us that there are ghosts still to be laid to rest, even 40 years after World War II ended.

Undoubtedly, though, it is on British shoulders that the crime's main burden lies, since it was to Britain that thousands of Russians came, women and children as

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well as men, soon after the June 1944 Allied landings in France. Many, though not all, had collaborated with the Germans, some at the point of a rifle, others all too willingly, since they had reason to detest Stalin's cruelties while of Hitler's they had no experience. Several million actively collaborated. Mr. Solzhenitsyn explains, though, that they would never have done so if they had not been driven to the final extreme, beyond the bounds of despair.

The British Foreign Office's harsh reaction to the problem was summarized a few days after the Allied invasion by Patrick Dean, who was British ambassador in Washington from 1965 to 1969: "This is purely a question for the Soviet authorities and does not concern His Majesty's Government. In due course all those with whom the Soviet authorities desire to deal must be handed over to them, and we are not concerned with the fact that they may be shot or otherwise more harshly dealt with than they might be under English law."

This attitude was typical of both diplomatic services in those days, echoing the unsympathetic and unhelpful attitude of both to projects for the rescue of Jews in Nazi custody at the same time. "If these men don't go back to Russia, where are they to go? We don't want them here," British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden wrote. Later he wrote of the danger of being "permanently saddled" with them, observing that the Soviet Union would not understand Britain's humanitarian motives in keeping them. U.S. Secretary of State James Byrnes wrote that there would be "no sympathy" in America for Russians who had collaborated with Germany.

The consequences of the Yalta decision, which was kept secret from the press, Congress and Parliament, were all too predictable. The S.S. Empire Pride, leaving Liverpool for Odessa with a cargo of Russian prisoners, had its departure delayed because a Russian walking toward the gangplank smashed his china mug against the ground and cut his throat with it. He was rushed to the hospital, but the Soviet escorting officer pointed out that the ship could not leave without him since he was on the manifest.

Other Russians jumped into the sea off Gibraltar and in the Dardanelles whenever the ship was in sight of land. A few minutes after reaching Odessa, Soviet guards marched the man who had attempted sui-

cide off the ship and shot him behind a packing case. British officers then saw another 31 Russians being taken into a shed and heard volleys of machine-gun fire coming from the shed a few moments later.

British soldiers had the terrible job of forcing 22,000 Cossacks, including 4,000 women and 2,500 children, into cattle trucks near Linz in Austria, from which they were taken to the Soviet zone. The operation used trickery to separate the officers from the rest. The Cossack officers were told to get into trucks to be taken to a mass meeting with the British high command for a discussion about their future. The trucks were then driven straight into a barbed-wire compound. Considerable violence had to be used the next morning when the 1,500 officers were delivered to the Soviet side and five committed suicide.

Cossack women threw their babies into the river that ran beside the camp, preferring to kill them than to allow Stalin to have them. One Cossack shot his wife, his three children and himself while others were being loaded. A British officer found the five of them lying side by side on a grassy bank. These are just a few of the terrible incidents that were witnessed and reported. But the scale of the tragedy is shown by the fact that, according to American records, no fewer than two million Soviet citizens were delivered to the East from areas of Europe under American control between the end of the war and Aug. 31, 1945.

We do not know how many of these vast masses went willingly, how many would have preferred to settle in the Western

world or how many had to be bludgeoned into submission before being taken to the Soviet side. We do know, however, that vast numbers of innocent people, including women and children, were forced by the Western Allies into the hands of a dictatorial regime no less brutal than the one we all fought to destroy. And they all went into concentration camps.

Most of the British and American participants in this grisly drama are today revolted by what they had to do. Even at the time many of them refused to continue when they realized what the job entailed. And there would doubtless have been an outcry if the details now available had been publicized. The fact remains nevertheless that many American and British soldiers and diplomats are responsible for sending groups of innocent people to their deaths. And this is what Klaus Barbie is accused of. And in each case the defense is the same: "We were the servants of a sovereign government and we were only obeying orders."

Fearful Reminder

It was these concerns that induced a group of British Parliament members, with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's approval, to erect a memorial in central London to the innocent people who were so mistreated in Britain's name. We can therefore, I hope, be absolved of the national "sin" of which Mr. Solzhenitsyn accuses us. But, although books on the subject have been published in the U.S., with a British television film based on one of them shown widely too, American public opinion appears (uncharacteristically) not yet to have appreciated its own responsibilities in the matter.

Of course, it need never have happened if one well-informed member of Congress, member of Parliament or journalist had revealed the full, gruesome facts as they now appear on the record, the deliveries to Stalin would have been stopped, Yalta agreement or no Yalta agreement. That is the value of our democracy. Tragically, however, no such person emerged at the vital moment. The episode remains therefore as a blot on the history of the English-speaking world, a fearful reminder that it is possible even for our own leaders—kindly men and women elected according to law—when caught between a Hitler and a Stalin, to sign a paper that secretly makes war criminals of us all.

Lord Bethell is author of "The Last Secret," which describes the forced repatriations, and on which the BBC film "Orders From Above" was based. An editorial on this subject appears today.

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